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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SARG FREES FIVE DAMASCUS SPRING PRISONERS

REF: DAMASCUS 00201

Classified By: CDA Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Human rights activists and family members have confirmed news reports announcing the release of five of the six Damascus Spring political prisoners, including former MPs Riad Seif and Mamoun al-Homsi. Human rights activists were quick to point out that the release was not an amnesty, but instead was based on a customary rule allowing a prisoner to be freed after serving three-quarters of his sentence. A senior Adraa prison official told the released prisoners that the release of Arif Dalilah, the last remaining Damascus Spring detainee, would be forthcoming. There is no indication that other detainees, like Habib Saleh, Kamal Labwani, or Nizar Rastanawi, will be released soon. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Joumana Seif, Riad Seif's daughter, and human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni confirmed January 19 the release of Riad Seif, Mamoun al-Homsi, Habib Issa, Fawwaz Tello, and Walid al-Bunni. According to Bunni, Adraa prison authorities requested on the night of January 17 that the five prisoners sign requests that, as is custom in Syria, they be released having served three-quarters of their sentences. Human rights lawyers Anwar al-Bunni and Haithem al-Maleh noted to PolOff in separate conversations that the release was not an amnesty, but instead the SARG simply implementing its own rules. All but Issa agreed to sign; Issa also protested that he did not want to be released without his fellow Damascus Spring detainee Arif Dalilah, but eventually acquiesced. Bunni noted that the released prisoners had been promised by Adraa Prison Director Samir Sheikh that Dalilah would be freed within 48 hours. (NOTE: Dalilah was sentenced to a substantially longer prison term than the others. It is not clear what legal pretext the SARG would use--if any-- to release him now.)

13. (C) Bunni visited all five men and said they were in good spirits, noting that Seif would be seeking medical care for his heart condition in France if authorities allow him to travel abroad, while Homsi will seek medical attention domestically. Bunni also downplayed the differences between Seif and Homsi's statements to al-Jazeera on January 18. He said that the contrast between Seif's aggressive statements against the SARG, versus Homsi's nationalistic, accommodating rhetoric, was simply a question of political style, but that the men share similar political goals.

14. (C) Bunni went on to explain that a number of factors had served to influence the SARG's decision: the summit of the Union of Arab Lawyers being held the weekend of January 20-23 near Damascus; the ongoing first-ever visit of an Amnesty International delegation to the country; and the statements by President Bush and other USG officials calling for the

prisoners, release. Bunni also added that the SARG may have wanted to placate civil society before the visit of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as at least one organization had planned to publicly speak out against the visit.
(COMMENT: The regime also may be responding to former VP Khaddam, making it difficult, after Seif's release, to drum up much support in opposition circles. That would lessen Khaddam's appeal to the international community as a potential alternative to the regime.)

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